
SOMALILAND: Higher education booms despite challenges

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Struggling to rebuild its infrastructure after years of civil war with Somalia, Somaliland saw its first university inaugurated in 1998 and has been steadily building its higher education system ever since. While significant challenges remain, higher education is booming as each year thousands of school-leavers pin their hopes on the country's universities and colleges.

By 1991 the infrastructure of Somaliland, on the eastern horn of Africa along the Red sea, had been completely destroyed by three years of armed struggle with Somalia's dictator Siyad Barre.

When the central government of that country collapsed in the same year, Somaliland broke away and re-established itself as a de facto independent republic (although its independent statehood remains unrecognised by Somalia and the international community).

With Somaliland's education system obliterated by war and anarchy, the country set about rebuilding and restoring.

Primary schools were given first priority, but seven years into this phase of its independence Somaliland's higher education system came back to life with the inauguration in November 1998 of Amoud University - the country's first post-war institution of higher learning.

There followed rapid growth in the number of universities and colleges, driven by increasing student demand for higher education.

Currently there are several colleges and more than 10 universities in Somaliland (each of the country's six governorates has at least one university). In terms of being able to offer higher education, this is a good starting point for a country with a population of 3.5 million people.

The leading universities are Amoud University in the west, Hargeisa University in the capital Hargeisa, and Burao University established in 2004 in Somaliland's second-biggest city.

These three universities' student population now exceeds 9,000, with high attendance by female students. The first medical doctors to be trained on Somaliland soil graduated in August 2007 from Amoud University.

Many of the universities are affiliated with foreign universities and examination bodies. For example, medical students at Amoud University sit for exams from England, while some of the universities receive visiting professors from foreign universities.

Admas University College (established in 1998 in Ethiopia and in 2006 in Somaliland) is regarded as the most notable of the foreign universities with a campus in Somaliland. The Ethiopian ministry of education recently accredited the institution's certificate, diploma and degree programmes.

Somaliland's universities offer vocational programmes, distance education and undergraduate degrees in diverse disciplines, but no postgraduate studies. This lack is probably due to the limited resources, including funds, of Somaliland's higher education system.

Most of the universities have been built with support from the people of Somaliland - whether within the country or in the diaspora - without significant foreign aid.

With a new government in power since July this year after free and fair elections, the country is more committed than ever to identifying funding solutions.

For, despite the growth and improvements in the higher education system, there remain myriad challenges, including limited resources, insufficient teacher and lecturer training, and low funding levels.

Among the biggest problems remains the country's lack of international recognition, which serves as a barrier to investment in higher education.

Generally, Somaliland's universities offer students a range of qualifications, and have the basic requirements in place for teaching and learning, although capacity and quality are sometimes low. For example, while universities offer students free internet and library access, libraries are for the most part short of books, reference and other educational material.

Over the past few years a number of organisations, including the African Education Trust and the European Union, have donated books and educational material to some universities, although such donations have usually fallen short in terms of the need.

Universities in Somaliland grant neither loans nor scholarships to students, and given widespread unemployment students are not able to get part-time jobs. Nonetheless, they manage to obtain the necessary fees.

Students are also not provided with residence facilities, although some universities are planning to move to the city outskirts and provide student housing.

Community engagement is emphasised, and students are expected to participate in offering HIV-Aids awareness, health care and conflict resolution programmes to communities.